

Lake protectors mark 15 years fighting tide of pollution

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GRAND ISLE -- People pledged to protect and restore water quality in Lake Champlain paused briefly Friday for a 15th birthday party, a bittersweet anniversary for a lake where some problems have gotten worse, not better.

Congress passed the Lake Champlain Special Designation Act in 1990. The Lake Champlain Basin Program was launched the following year to coordinate efforts among the federal government, New York, Quebec and Vermont.

The primary goal: to study, understand and address environmental problems threatening the lake's ecosystem and humans' enjoyment of the lake.

"Back then, we couldn't tell how fast Lake Champlain was changing, or in what direction," said Lori Fisher, director of the Lake Champlain Committee, a private advocacy group that lobbied for creation of the program. "It really took this forum to coordinate tripartite action on the lake."

More than \$70 million and 15 years later, the Basin Program and its partners have accomplishments to tout -- robust research, education and outreach programs; the removal of PCBs from Cumberland Bay; the cleanup of wastewater treatment plants; steps to clean up farm water pollution, and more.

But partygoers clearly had the lake's many continuing problems on their mind, from phosphorus pollution and toxic blue-green algae blooms to the arrival of invasive species like zebra mussels and alewives.

New cleanup challenges have emerged, including growing awareness of the pollutants carried by urban stormwater, a problem largely unknown 15 years ago.

Several people smiled ironically when asked what should be celebrated, clearly thinking of algae blooms that have been turning Missisquoi Bay into an unpleasant green soup for at least part of every summer since the late 1990s.

Pierre Leduc, chairman of the Quebec Citizens Advisory Committee on Lake Champlain, spends his summers on the bay. He thought a moment before answering the question.

"Let's face it," he said. "If we did not have the Lake Champlain Basin Program and hadn't been doing all the things we have, the problems would be a lot worse."

The crowd gave long applause for U.S. Sen. Jim Jeffords, I-Vt., one of those who helped create the Lake Champlain program and who is retiring this year.

"This is a God-given, fantastic place," he said, warning that restoration efforts "could fall apart" if commitment fades.

Perhaps the afternoon's most universal theme was that no anniversary or deadline will mark the

end of efforts to abate pollution and protect the lake.

As Fisher, of the Lake Champlain Committee, put it, "As long as people live by this lake, they are going to have an impact. It's not so much how we manage the lake as it is how we manage ourselves. We can't let up." Contact Candace Page at 660-1865 or cpage@bfp.burlingtonfreepress.com